Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)

Against myth of “eternal feminine”

“When I use the words *woman* or *feminine* I evidently refer to no archetype, no changeless essence whatsoever; the reader must understand the phrase ‘in the present state of education and custom’ after most of my statements” (xxxvi).

beginning of pt. II: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.

No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society” (267).

Against a single definition of woman, esp. one that would be merely reactive
i.e. woman not just a derivation of man, not just a diminished second

Destiny, fatalism, historical reductionism discarded for belief in choice, will,
possibility of future?

Is such proclamation of choice and possibility just voluntarist for B.?

Don’t think so: difficult methodology:

How give a sense of specificity to phenomenal experience of being female without reducing notion of woman to certain of those specific experiences (such as reproduction, desire, or work)?
A) Biology

Often begins arguments (in classical tradition of rhetoric still taught in France to some degree) by anticipating opposition and then refuting Will argue in the name of science, psychology, or economics in order then to complicate that perspective

And while dismantling reductive or totalizing or representative or emblematic descriptions of women in vocabularies of biology, psychology, and economy, Beauvoir is also wary of ignoring these areas as realms of causality

biology not a “justification” of gender or sexuality, but it may be a condition for those all the same

points out that notion of biological sex itself not totally stable
not just gamete, chromosome, genitals, or ability to reproduce which defines experience of being female

examples of intersexual, or cross-gendered bodies
sperm is not just active principle; egg is not just passive
both create and maintain

cannot just deduce gender from sexual characteristics
Science as objective, empirical knowledge?
Confusion over values in biology (I.e. is hermaphroditism an “evolutionary advance” or a “primitivism”)
Makes clear presence of ideological values in scientific assessments
Objectivity of experimental method of acquiring facts not totally divorceable from the cultural assumptions of value that would determine what facts to look for, or how to read those facts

In speaking in name of biological science, however, B. does tend to overly personify and mythologize those perspectives, perhaps unfairly
“Beyond the brief moment of copulation the life of the male [insect, moth, bee, ant, human?] is useless and irresponsible” (19). What is the male being referent here?

Essentializing from body to consciousness at times (27)
In arguing against reducibility of woman to reproduction, does B. overstate idea of pregnancy/maternity as alienation, burden? (22) a useful way of demythologizing; Carolee Schneemann anecdote, women in ’60’s art world
B) The Psychoanalytic Point of View
argues, to good effect, that Freud’s notion of female sexuality is usually just derivative of his notion of male sexuality
furthermore, psychoanalytic perspective can become dehistoricized

(40) Freud fails to take account of historical & cultural contingency of father’s sovereignty in Oedipus complex; a Viennese, middle-class thing?
a reduction of choice to structure of desire, structure of family romance
as alternative, B. says woman to seek “self-fulfillment in transcendence”
is this a Western feminism, post cult of individualism?
B.also, to some degree, reduces possible historical or individual component in psychoanalysis
remember dream interpretation not just dependent on abstract, universal symbols
C) The View of Historical Materialism

interesting critiques of Soviet state, not all French intellectuals so skeptical

In dismantling Engels, w/ his claims of original matriarchy, criticizes his inability to explain whence desire to institute patriarchy
she says material explanation of new tools, technology (bronze) not enough instead, B. proposes the “imperialism of the human consciousness” (58)
part of the Hegelian vocab of transcendence & alienation
says Engels not sufficiently historical, but does her ontology of transcendence & alienation also offer a kind of historical disfigurement, or oversimplification, a reinstating of mastery?

Are Engels’ dreams of communal matriarchy before patriarchy, just a way of using feminine to argue socialism, and thereby to fetishize a certain idea of woman as plenitude, sharing, fertility, generosity, openness?

Division of sexes not just division of labor

“but for that matter, to do away with the family is not necessarily to emancipate woman” (58).
D) Myths & Assessments

Basic ambivalence to myth of Woman

    can be both fullness and lack depending on desire of Self for
    overcoming own lack through integration or sensing own
    fullness through comparative superiority

After complicating this perspectives, B. argues for a restoration of
sense of existential totality, of ontology, of complexity
But is that restorative fullness really an experiential quality, or just the
negation of previous negated monisms?
Does notion of transcendence over alienation (from Hegel through Marx to Sartre) just ontologize a certain psychological desire to master Self through mastering Other?  

see comments on “imperialism of human consciousness” (58); is struggle, competition an eternal?

Or does B’s notion of transcendence have an ethics of (perhaps) love involved in it? A notion of learning about the world, nature, other people, other cultures, other genders, other sexualities not just as possession or mastery, but as reciprocity?

Emphasis on “lived body,” of specificity of being female (or male) outside of overarching generalizations about such experiences